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ABSTRACT

The increasing interdependency and regional specialization of today's world demand a new approach to the teaching of introductory geography courses. By focusing on the interrelationship of physical, cultural, and economic geography, a course for general education students can foster development of the geographic perspective on human systems needed to understand contemporary world issues. For example, physical geography would be taught in terms of the aspects of the earth's environment that relate to the central problems of human life; cultural geography would emphasize details that affect human lifestyles. Students would leave such a course with a systems view of how and why people live as they do in different places on earth. (LP)

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PROBLEMS OF GEOGRAPHY AS GENERAL EDUCATION

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PROBLEMS OF GEOGRAPHY AS GENERAL EDUCATION

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There is no question. The most important course to any geography program - highschool or college - is the basic course that meets a student's general education requirements. It is the one, and often only, opportunity that the geography program has to present its perspective to general education students.

The problem is that there is so much to cram into this one course. In addition to content, there is the place-name vocabulary, the mapreading and other skills, fundamental ideas about environment and/or culture and economics. How does one put it all together?

I submit that the answer to that question is the fundamental question in teaching geography in general education. How is the course organized? What are its aims? I do not think enough serious attention is paid to that question either by individual instructors or the profession at large, including textbook authors. For again, the one general education course in the curriculum is where the public at large gets its image of geography and where students get the only package of geographic information that they will take away for life.

In the majority of geography courses I know of the priority goes to one of the following:

1. Techniques: map reading, remote sensing, quantitative methods, inquiry teaching methods
   a. Map reading is about the only topic labeled as "geography" by teachers of social science
   b. The techniques are tools necessary to "do" geography
2. Content
   a. There is so much background necessary to teach geography
      1. In terms of the environment students need to know about earth-sun, climatic processes, soil process, and other

aspects that are really earth-science rather than geography

2. In terms of culture one can get involved in language differences, different perspective of religion, settlement types, and city structure that are essential to the study of Geography, but are not Geography.

3. Concepts
   a. Here is a chance to "showcase" the concepts important to geographic research. This was the emphasis of the High School Geography Project.
      1. diffusion theory
      2. central place theory
      3. the gravity model of spatial interaction
4. Teaching Methods
   a. Here is a tempting way to "sell" the course whatever the content
      1. Discussion rather than lecture
      2. inquiry approach

GEOGRAPHY: PERSPECTIVE, NOT TECHNIQUES, CONCEPTS, OR CONTENT

The problem is that geography teaching is about all of the things above, but these things aren't geography. Geography is about people living in different ways at different places over the earth. Other subject deals with earth-sun, landform processes, settlement types, agricultural regions, hydrologic cycles, cultural diffusion, and central place - of course, not from the geographer's perspective. Ours is the only discipline that uses these concepts as means to illuminate the geographic problem: explaining life at different places on the earth.

Geography is not techniques, content, concepts, or teaching methods; it is a perspective. And that perspective has been recognized as essential by people from the time of the cave dwellers and one that is even more essential today.

Everything Geographers teach should be organized towards the end of presenting the geographic perspective. Each course should be organized around that theme. Each unit should be tied to that theme. All content should be tied to that theme.

TEACHING COMPONENTS AS PART OF A WHOLE

A one-shot geography course for general education students should not deal exclusively with physical geography, cultural geography of economic geography. It should focus on the interrelationship between the above geographic components. Thus, its approach to physical geography is different than that of a physical geography course per se. And so it is with its treatment of cultural and economic geography. The aim in dealing with these components of geography is to emphasize their dimensions that are most significant in dealing with how people in places live.

In the general education course in Geography physical geography must be taught, not in terms of physical processes in themselves, but, rather, the emphasis should be on the aspects of the earth environment that have meaning to the central problem of human life on the earth. Thus, the students should understand the earth environment as the resource-base to be managed. The main thing they need to know the potential of the environment of a place to grow plants and to produce minerals economically.

In the same way cultural geography in the introductory course is not concerned with cultural details in themselves. Rather they should be seen in terms of the way they affect human lifestyles and the human approach to the resource base. It's not the sacred cows that are important in Hindu India; its the fact that the worship of the cows is an important dimension of the way that Hindus perceive their environmental base. Each culture approaches the earth environment with its own particular set of "blinders" that narrows the potential for using that environment.

In the economic geography component of the general education course its not understanding central place theory - all the K values the other details - that is important, but that the basic understanding of ideas like threshold and range are helpful in understanding the relations between cities and rural areas, big cities and little centers.

In the one general education course the object is not to learn to read maps or remote sensing images. Rather the important idea is that when you know these techniques they can help you better deal with the problem of collecting data and making geographic generalizations.

THE NEED FOR A NEW REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Physical geography, cultural geography, and economic geography are important subsystems of the discipline, but geography is about human life on the earth and, thus, the integration of the three subsets. For general education the core of geography remains the approach to places - places usually brought together in spatial generalizations called regions. Here is the core of the geographic perspective - trying to understand how and why people live as they do in different places over the earth.

The new geography once abandoned this basic core of geography as being too complex, too unscientific. It was too difficult to measure, to examine with proper rigor. But now with computer maps, remote sensing images, computer models we can approach the central geographic problem more effectively

But in dealing with people living in regions we need to examine what is central to the geographic perspective. What do we want to achieve by the study of regions?

In the past the aim was to understand the region as primarily a self-standing entity. The problem was to see how people in the region made use of their own regional resource base. The concern was with the internal workings of the cultural relations to the evironmental base.

But, in the modern world, that's not the important aspect of regions. The U.S. economy is built upon the diversity of its regions. Each region produces goods, not for itself, but as contributions to the overall economy. Thus, the Midwest specializes in corn, soybeans, and hogs for the country as a whole and manufactures steel, autos and other metal products for the national economy. On the other hand, California produces fruits and vegetables and specialty crops such as cotton and rice and its manufacturing is centered around high technology - aerospace and microprocessing equipment. To give students real understanding of the country in which they live we must deal not with the midwest or California, not as worlds in themselves, but as essential functioning parts of the national system. In dealing with regions we should be on the contributions of the regional parts to the larger whole. In the United States the regional parts contribute largely to the national economy, but for most countries in the world - with much smaller land areas and populations than the United States - the regions contribute to an increasingly global system.

In the world of global transport and communication systems we need to shift view away from places as places in themselves and to the effort of understanding the relations of people in a particular place to the larger worldwide systems. In today's world, some people in some places are only slightly a part of worldwide economic and cultural interactions - namely the traditional rural components of developing countries; others - such as the United States, the Soviet Union, and Japan - are completely parts of global cultural and economic systems. We need a new regional geography, one that gives meaning not to the regional method but to the real world in which the students live.

Twenty years ago Edward Ackerman spoke of the importance of viewing human life on earth from a systems view. We want to see how places fit into the larger scene of life today. We want to examine the flows of goods, people, ideas, and money - to understand their channels and their significance to human life in places over the earth. Let me give you a glimpse of the real world as I see it:

Countries remain important units in the world politically and ethnically. But a new global network focused on large metropolitan area nodes, not countries, dominates culture and business today. I see the future as the struggle between countries that have organized themselves in terms of particular cultures occupying regional space and metropolitan centers that are organized in a system of large metropolitan nodes with connections one to the other and with the smaller centers and rural places that surround them. Few geography courses even touch on the struggle for power between these two different ways of organizing space.

THE NEED FOR A NEW GEOGRAPHY

My point in all of this is that we need a new geography in the one-shot general education course. This approach should be built on the longstanding approach of the discipline - the concern for human life over the earth. But it should use the tools of modern geography - the new concepts and methods. It should focus on the human systems that dominate today's world using long range transportation and communication. It should deal with the realities of today's world - the increasing interdependency and regional specialization. The concern should be on integrating the parts into the global whole.

We need to face up to the importance of what we teach as geography in the general education curriculum. It is the essence of our existence as a discipline. Each of us as individual classroom teachers needs to ponder the problem. But more importantly it should be a prime concern of our discipline. The National Council for Geographic Education and the Association of American Geographers should have (1) a taskforce to try to articulate the aims of the general education course and (2) have a massive campaign, not to educate the world outside, but the geographic community of teachers.